



February 7, 2023
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Before the Higher Education Committee

*In Support of **SB 936: An Act Concerning Workforce Development** with additions*

Good afternoon, Senator Slap, Representative Haddad, and members of the Higher Education Committee. My name is July Bisono Tapia. I have been a nurse for 2 years and have worked as a Nurse for the Southwest Connecticut Mental Health System for just over one year. I work in an inpatient unit, where I provide for the safety and health of 21 patients affected by serious mental health conditions. For my first nursing job, I chose to work in mental health to help address an issue in this country that is only growing and is often overlooked. In addition to meeting their immediate medical needs, we help the patients utilize important coping skills. Without proper care, there is a potential for them to seriously decompensate and struggle to return to the community.

By its nature, our work exposes us to risks of danger when patients act unpredictably or don't take their medications as prescribed. A lot of our patients suffer from comorbidities alongside their mental health conditions: many cannot walk independently. We don't have enough equipment for mobility aids and getting patients out of bed. While we do physically demanding and risky work, one of the most challenging things about the current structure at SWCMHS is the staffing and scheduling. Creating a schedule that would appropriately staff the unit is always nearly impossible.

When staff members are frequently working very long shifts, the quality of care may be worse. When there are not enough staff and we are mandated to work, we work 16 hours and then we are expected to come back at the usual time the next day. When you are overworked and deprived of proper sleep your brain cannot function to its full potential; you can't identify problems with the patients as well, psychologically or medically. As a nurse I am mandated about once a month, but Mental Health workers are mandated more frequently. The staffing shortage directly harms the quality of care we can provide, and prolongs the time it will take for our patients to heal and return to the community.

To address the staffing crisis in DMHAS, I ask that you include language in SB 936 that would:

- Expand capacity within our public university nursing programs.
- Create clinical placements/internship programs in collaboration with our public colleges and universities.

- Fund and create preceptor programs.
- Reserve slots for current or future state employees in nursing programs.
- Provide loan forgiveness for RNs after 7 years of state service.

Building a recruitment pipeline is one of the strongest and fastest ways to get more qualified nurses on the floor.

As a Latina nurse, I know that we need more Latinos to go into the profession to provide better care to our Latino and Spanish speaking patients. There are many times when the patients present needs in Spanish that cannot easily be translated into English and a nurse from the same cultural background is the only one who can properly provide care. Investing in the nursing profession and creating more job placements will help create stronger pathways for underrepresented groups in the nursing profession like Hispanic and Latino residents, people with low incomes and all people of color. It will also help us meet the gaps for the mental health needs of our Spanish-speaking patients. It is a matter of equity for both healthcare providers and those we serve.

It isn't possible for just one nurse to help when a patient needs special attention or help with mobility... without a team, we might be leaving the rest of the patients to suffer. The care we provide has the potential to be life changing and positive for not only the patients, but for our state, when we do it the right way. When we work together as a team, we can do more. Help us create a team of qualified and diverse nursing professionals at the Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services by investing in District 1199's "Grow Our Own" policies in our colleges and universities. Our state will be better for it. Thank you for your time!